

Dr. La Francis Rodgers-Rose: A Force to be Reckoned With

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It is a privilege and honor to share the impact of Dr. La Francis Rodgers-Rose on my life and career. Dr. Rodgers-Rose was my only Black woman professor when I was an undergraduate at Princeton University. It was the spring of my senior year, and I enrolled in her course, “The Black Woman.” I was excited to have a professor who “looked like me.” I walked into the first class and was mesmerized by her: she was scholarly, nurturing, and welcoming. She was interested in getting to know each of the students and understanding who we were. She had so much energy! Her class was an oasis for me: not only could I participate in scholarly discussions about Black women, Black families, and the socialization of Black children, but I could do so in a classroom environment that felt like a family. I was thrilled that I had this experience before I graduated.

As I reflect on this class, I realize that Dr. Rodgers-Rose intentionally designed it to capture the values of Black culture. One only needs to read her groundbreaking article, “*The Dominant Values of Black Culture*,” to understand that her class environment reflects this. *Communal existentialism* was demonstrated – people in the class shared with one another – snacks and ideas! Information about University events was shared, especially registration, financial aid deadlines, etc. This did not occur between one person and their neighbor; sharing occurred so that the entire class could benefit (the class size was about 15 students). There was a lack of competition among students regarding grades; we knew that our job was to learn, and we were eager to do so.

This was a decidedly different classroom climate from the Organic Chemistry class I took my second year. Dr. Rodgers-Rose had high standards for her students, and showed care and concern (what many now refer to as the dialectical of “tough love”). There was a natural give-and-take during discussions, and the uniqueness of every student was appreciated. People liked and respected each other. An observer of this class, who was not aware of the “dominant values of Black culture,” would likely evaluate this class as too informal, not scholarly enough, without a professor who had control over the class. Obviously, such an observer would be using the lens of white socialization (following the tenets of Sullivan, 1953).



Dr. Lily D. McNair has a 30-year career in higher education. Most recently, she served as the 8th and first female president of Tuskegee University. Prior to this, she held academic administrative positions and was professor of psychology at the University of Georgia, Spelman College, and Wagner College. She earned her A.B. in Psychology from Princeton University and Ph.D. in psychology from Stony Brook University.

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The impact of Dr. Rodgers-Rose’s article, “The Dominant Values of Black Culture,” is far-reaching, having influenced the development of the fields of Black Studies, and Sociology, as well as its subspecialties (e.g., the Black Woman, the Black Family, the Psychology of Black Children, etc.).

Dr. Rodgers-Rose’s research has also influenced my own career, and her work has formed the theoretical and conceptual basis for my research on Black women and gender roles, African-American youth and families, and my clinical experience as a therapist with African Americans adults, children, families and couples.

In addition, I’ve taught the course “The Black Woman” throughout my career and have consistently assigned Dr. Rodgers-Rose’s (1980) edited textbook, *The Black Woman*. This volume is a multidisciplinary approach to the study of Black women’s experiences, from their perspectives, and includes classic articles ranging from economic, political, and educational institutions to the social psychology of Black women.

Dr. Rodgers-Rose was a role model for me, in ways I did not imagine when I was her student over 40 years ago. (I should admit that when I graduated from Princeton I did not know I would become a university professor and HBCU president.)

Fast forward 30 years. I was a tenured faculty member in Psychology, and Provost at a liberal arts college in New York city. A serendipitous meeting occurred on a steamy summer day in Orlando, Florida. While at my husband’s Dukes Family Reunion, I met Dr. Valija C. Rose, Dr. Rodgers-Rose’s daughter! Valija is my husband’s cousin, and she was about to begin a faculty position at the University of Georgia (UGA), where I taught for 12 years. Valija and I had lots of conversations about UGA, and I felt that in some small way, I was again connected to Dr. La Francis (and paying her back, so to speak, by helping her daughter adjust to life as a new faculty member). A year or so later, Valija and Dr. Rodgers-Rose came to our home for dinner and an overnight stay. What a reunion we had! We laughed and talked late into the night about our times at Princeton. Dr. Rodgers-Rose remembered all of her students – some of whom, I am certain, are writing tributes in this journal – and it was comforting to share these stories and memories of a time that was so pivotal in my own

classmates were having dinner with us, so that we could reminisce, honor her, and recreate the “family” we had when we were at Princeton.

I’ve told Dr. Rodgers-Rose that she and I are now related, and we keep in touch regularly. She continues to be very active in her research and work with the International Black Women’s Congress (IBWC), and has the gravitas, passion, and commitment that she had 50 years ago. She continues to bring together African-American scholars (particularly women) to address social, economic and political issues in our lives.

Fifty years later, since the publication of her pioneering article, “The Dominant Values of Black Culture,” she is still a force to be reckoned with. Dr. La Francis Rodgers-Rose stands as someone who has not only impacted the scholarship on Black women and culture, but has also changed the lives and careers of so many students.

References

- Rodgers-Rose, L. (Ed.) (1980). *The Black Woman*. Sage Publications.
- Sullivan, H.S. (1953). *The Interpersonal Theory of Psychiatry*. W.W. Norton and Company.